



Copyright © Authors 2025 <https://www.justicepolicejournal.com> International Journal of Justice and Police Sciences – Official Journal of the International Institute of Justice and Police Sciences (IJPS).
January – June 2025. Vol. 1(1): 168–171. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15721798
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief – K. Jaishankar. Published by IJPS & Appa Publications, Bengaluru, India.
This is a Gold Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and any derivative works are shared under the same license.



BOOK REVIEW:

The Seventh Beggar: Notes from Prison Cells (2024)

By Josef K. Zohar

~ First Edition ~ Originally self-published in Hebrew. Translated into English.

K. Jaishankar¹ 

Founding Editor-in-Chief, International Journal of Justice and Police Sciences (IJPS)

Josef K. Zohar's *The Seventh Beggar: Notes from Prison Cells* (2024) is an extraordinary, chilling text. This memoir skillfully weaves personal experience, philosophical analysis, and legal analysis while recounting Zohar's gruesome path through the Israeli justice system. More than an account of Zohar's legal and personal struggles, it tackles universal themes of justice, identity, family loyalty, and resistance to Zohar's fierce devotion to his family, intellectual integrity, and unvarnished vulnerability. It exposes the systemic flaws of the legal system while celebrating the hopefulness of belief and storytelling.

The memoir plunges readers deep into Zohar's dizzying experience, which begins with his arrest on suspicion that he murdered his father, Moshe Zohar, a respected figure in Israel and diamond merchant. The arrest traps Zohar in a Kafkaesque nightmare consisting of ongoing interrogations, character assassinations from the media, and finally prison. Like Kafka's protagonist, Zohar finds that the only thing this system produces is pressure to confess, if you can manage to say anything at all, rather than provide truth.

The book lays bare the insidious pressures of the criminal justice system—everything from coerced confessions by police filled with suspicion, to screenwriter-like psychological manipulation during interrogations, to blatant

¹ Principal Director and Professor of Criminology and Justice Sciences, International Institute of Justice and Police Sciences, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Email: jaishankar@justicepoliceinstitute.org ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6380-727X>

violations of due process. Zohar's confusing experience was not singular, as it provides a scathing critique of legal systems that privilege confessions ("the queen of evidence") over investigation. The memoir can give voice to innumerable others (including maybe those who helped him with the memoir) who have experienced similar injustices but did not get to share their stories publicly.

Throughout the book, Zohar is deeply enmeshed in Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's mystical allegory, *The Seven Beggars*, which he interprets through his suffering. It is even illustrated by Zohar as the seventh beggar's conundrum, and he jauntily continues the story of the seventh beggar, seemingly rewriting his traumatic narrative into a life of recovery.

Moshe, Zohar's father, is the *seventh beggar*: a person unable to move due to ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), but in spirit alive and connected to family. This metaphor allows Zohar to make sense of the political, emotional, and spiritual experience of his father and his death, and to also create a frame for his angst and morality, and to reflect on his self and his philosophies. This choice emphasizes Zohar's thinking regarding runaways like himself, that storytelling can be restorative, for us personally, and culturally.

The Seventh Beggar is ultimately a very personal exploration of identity, as Zohar's relationship with his father makes up the emotional anchor of the journey. Zohar's complex feelings for his father, fraught with admiration, jealousy, resentment, and love, motivated a lot of the self-exploration. Zohar, like the emperor, admires and respects the journey of his father's self-made diamond dealer, decorated war hero, while also navigating expectations of him that went well beyond what would normally be considered in a relationship.

Zohar's self-examination includes his identities as a husband, father, and Jew. Spiritual practices and rituals, such as maintaining a Kaddish for his father, studying the Talmud, and reading Levinas, helped Zohar be active in his fight and allowed him a sense of grounding. These cultural and spiritual acts connected him to the wisdom of his heritage, in which he draws hope, strength, and meaning to endure the hardships he confronts.

Zohar's account of the merit with which he thinks philosophically and especially in Jewish philosophy and Jewish ethics. He draws on Emmanuel Levinas as a source of inspiration. Levinas informs Zohar to think of people in their relationships and the ethical responsibility of those relationships. Zohar highlights Levinas's suggestion that a person's essence is revealed in their relationships with other people, which also supports the central aims and themes of this memoir: to find meaning and humanity in suffering.

The text embodies a staggering level of philosophical depth alongside raw emotion while making Zohar's intellectual journey intensely personal. He ponders the injustices of being imprisoned in Branco, and he begins to question his potential



role as a moral agent who increasingly deals with ethically murky waters. Even if Zohar's meanderings about justice, truth, and integrity only inspire readers to examine their ethical compass, the memoir is value-packed when you count those moments. What is striking about *The Seventh Beggar* is not just its intellectual depth or the emotional depth, but also Zohar's often brave descriptions of the realities of the horrors he witnessed inside Abu Kabir prison. His images are disturbing and speak to the reality of what it is like to endure dehumanization behind bars.

Although the psychological impact of imprisonment is unmistakably harmful, Zohar does discover tiny expressions of solidarity and humanity. One single act of kindness—a guard handing Zohar an apple and stating he believes Zohar to be innocent—suggests that even one of the most dramatic encroachments on humanity still holds lingering moments of humanity. Zohar's talks with his fellow prisoners have the same power. Zohar and his other cellmates have had sit-downs, and as a result, Zohar's cellmates—who are presented to him as human monsters—start to communicate with him on a level that connects through shared experience in the oppressive idea of prison, and shows how humanity, connection, and dignity can coexist behind closed walls.

The Seventh Beggar offers a blistering critique of the Israeli justice system's overreliance on evidence (that you read about in the news), its use of media to assassinate character, and its blind spots surrounding the mental health impacts of its methodologies. Zohar particularly critiques "covert investigations." The memoir raises serious issues about frontiers of ethics in law enforcement, particularly around justice vs. civil rights and a balancing act of security vs. personal liberties. In this way, Zohar's critique is not simply reserved for his specific circumstances, but also appeals to global concerns that reflect systemic injustices in legal systems globally. By placing his own experience within these broader dialogues, Zohar challenges the reader to face the uncomfortable truths that are embedded in the institutions that profess to deliver justice.

Zohar's writing is a powerful mix of lyrical prose and unflinching honesty that effectively captures the emotional and psychological aspects of his experience. Interleaving poetry, philosophy, and brief multimodal descriptions in alternating chapters yields a rich harmony of voices and perspectives. While some readers may struggle with the fragmented treatment, as reflecting the turbulent, disorienting, inane experience encountered by Zohar, it very much fits the narrative.

And the moments of reporting his father's account are vital, helping narrativity about the context of Zohar's arrest and incarceration as an emergence of reality, not awareness. While jarring at times and interrupting the immediacy of Zohar's

story, they provide a necessary space in the narrative and re-emphasize the generational legacy of resilience and strength from which Zohar drew as he faced incarceration and the long process of healing and writing.

Although *The Seventh Beggar* is an intensely powerful memoir, there are some clear limitations. Some readers may find the legal accounts of the case somewhat tedious, particularly those unfamiliar with the complexities of the Israeli legal system. While some description is necessary for the reader to follow what transpired in the case, an abundance of detail may very well disengage or bore some audiences. In addition, as it is ultimately a personal memoir, it raises questions of reliability.

Zohar's decidedly subjective deposition should lead the reader to ask whether the autobiographical representation shaped by Zohar's perspective itself makes truth sloppy, biased, and too ill-defined. Despite these important limitations, *The Seventh Beggar* is a powerful read in terms of emotional authenticity and intellectual rigor. The memoir effectively intermingles narrative with philosophical concepts in addition to social commentary that will appeal to the widest audiences.

In the end, *the Seventh Beggar* is a poignant expression of the human spirit. Zohar's search for justice through a flawed legal system becomes an opportunity to uncover deeper sources of strength, meaning, and humanity. The story's significant message is that faith, story, and human connection can provide essential scaffolding to find meaning in suffering and help navigate it, leading to growth and, ultimately, redemption.

This book is likely to have great appeal to a wide audience, especially those interested in the connection between personal narrative and philosophical reflection, offering perspectives and insights on justice, resilience, and faith. The book will appeal to legal scholars and law students because of its critique of the Israeli legal system, and those interested in Jewish philosophy and tradition will find its exploration of religion and ethics to be important. Furthermore, readers attracted to memoirs of personal struggle and triumph in the fight against systemic injustice will have a source of inspiration and comfort in Zohar's compelling story. It is a memoir for anyone who desires to acknowledge the lasting strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity or hardship.

The Seventh Beggar explores a very rare experience that provides readers with a narrative that can be appreciated on emotional, intellectual, and analytical levels. It is a book that not only challenges and inspires but also issues a serious invitation to attend to the levels of control and agency we exert or are permitted in our interactions and engagement with the world. It is a book that enables serious engagement with the human condition and the capable heart of the human spirit that can sustain and survive trauma, struggle, hardship, and loss.